

Bible Societies.

AN

ADDRESS

BEFORE THE

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BY THE

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BIBLE SOCIETIES.

Long before the opening of the nineteenth century we find Societies, which, in connection with their other lines of work, to a very limited extent, published and circulated the Holy Scriptures. There were also Societies which, though making Bible distribution their only work, confined their efforts to certain classes of the community, as soldiers and sailors, or to persons of a single nationality. But not until the 7th of March, 1804 was an organization formed which made the circulation of the Holy Scriptures its sole object, and the entire world its field. The institution of the British and Foreign Bible Society eighty-nine years ago awakened the most profound interest in both hemispheres. Before twelve years had elapsed Bible Societies were in active operation in Iceland, Finland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Holland, Switzerland, Saxony, Prussia, and Russia, as well as in India and North America.

FORMATION OF THE AMERICAN BIBLE SOCIETY.

The American Bible Society was founded in New York in the year 1816 by sixty delegates from thirty-five local Bible societies, which had been formed in

various parts of the United States during the eight years immediately preceding. Serious embarrassment was experienced in conducting the work of so many distinct organizations, and a wise economy of expenditure was found to be impossible without some general oversight. Extensive interchange of views on the part of many leading men, in Church and State, resulted in the calling of a convention which, with great unanimity, decided to organize a national institution upon a foundation substantially the same as that of the British and Foreign Bible Society, naming as its field not only the United States and their Territories, but other countries also, whether Christian, Mohammedan, or Pagan.

THE MOST STRIKING CHARACTERISTIC.

The Constitution of the British and Foreign Bible Society declares that its "*sole object shall be to encourage a wider circulation of the Holy Scriptures without note or comment.*" The same words are embodied in the Constitution of the American Bible Society, and they set forth the most striking characteristic of all true Bible Societies. They are institutions which devote no time to formulating creeds, ordaining preachers, establishing schools, or founding churches, but they offer to men of every clime the one Inspired Book without whose revelation creeds are void, preachers without a living message, schools

without true wisdom, and churches without saving power.

BIBLE SOCIETIES UNDENOMINATIONAL.

It is well for us to note, still further, that while Missionary Societies are for the most part denominational, Bible Societies were founded and are maintained by the co-operation of Christians identified with various branches of the Church. The Bible Society is not an Evangelical Alliance, using that term in the received sense, but it may well be questioned whether the Evangelical Alliance could have been formed in 1846 if Bible Societies had not, for forty years, given impressive proof that it is quite practicable for Christians of different names to labor together on the most cordial terms with the most satisfactory results. The Rev. John Owen, one of the founders of the British and Foreign Bible Society and one of its first secretaries, says that "Christians had been taught to regard each other with a kind of pious estrangement or rather with consecrated hostility," The scene in the convention which formed the British and Foreign Bible Society seemed strange to him, and indicated the dawn of a new era in Christendom. The published accounts of Bible meetings for the first forty years of the century rarely fail to emphasize the fact that men of different denominations have met together upon the broad platform

which the Bible Society afforded, and as Christian workers have actually rejoiced together with great joy. To our generation this seems so natural and proper that we wonder how our fathers could have regarded it wonderful.

THEN AND NOW.

When the British and Foreign Bible Society was formed the Bible had been translated into less than forty languages. Several versions were obsolete and others demanded revision. Then too, the Bible was so costly that its possession was quite beyond the reach of the poor. No one dreamed that each person could ever acquire a copy of his own. The Bible Society began to multiply versions, to publish volumes of the Scriptures by tens of thousands, and to supply them to the various peoples of the earth at nominal prices, or even without price. This work has expanded from year to year, and especially during the past twenty years, until the Scriptures have been issued in nearly 400 languages or dialects, and until the Bible, in all parts of the world, is the cheapest of all books.

TOTAL ISSUES.

The total issues of Bible Societies thus far, exceed the most enthusiastic anticipations of their founders. The British and Foreign Bible Society has issued more than one hundred and thirty-five

millions of volumes; the American Bible Society nearly fifty-seven millions; and the Bible Society of Scotland more than thirteen millions, making an aggregate for the three leading Bible societies of the world of (206,201,404) two hundred and six millions two hundred and one thousand four hundred and four volumes. There are nine other societies which have issued each less than five million volumes, but more than one million, nine which have issued each less than one million volumes, but more than half a million; nine others which have issued each less than half a million but more than two hundred thousand volumes. Here then are thirty Bible Societies whose aggregate circulation amounts to (240,955,447) two hundred and forty millions nine hundred and fifty-five thousand four hundred and forty-seven volumes. It should, however, be noted, that more than four-fifths of this immense number have been issued by the British and Foreign and the American Societies. How impossible it is for the human mind to compass the stupendous results of such a work! What multitudes of wanderers have been reclaimed, and of mourners comforted in all parts of the habitable globe by these two hundred and forty millions of inspired volumes!

TWO DEPARTMENTS—HOME AND FOREIGN.

The practical operations of a great Bible Society are naturally divided into two departments—the

home and foreign. It would be easy for me to use the entire time allotted to me in speaking of the magnificent work of the British and Foreign Society. I know of nothing in the form of organized Christian effort which equals the breadth of its plans or the moral grandeur of its achievements, but my duty to-day is chiefly to illustrate the principles which lie at the foundation of all Bible Society effort, and I may be permitted to do so by glancing at the operations of the Society with which I am most familiar.

The home field of the American Bible Society embraces every State and Territory of the Union. Nearly two thousand auxiliary societies give direction to the work in their respective fields, which generally cover a single county, though there are a few township, and a still smaller number of State societies. It will be observed that in many portions of the country, especially on the frontier, the population is so sparse that it is impracticable to organize and conduct efficient auxiliaries. The Parent Society has, therefore, found it necessary to adopt a system of colportage. Millions of scattered families have thus been supplied with the Scriptures during the past ten years. The Society has during its history, through various agencies, distributed in the United States more than forty millions of volumes of the inspired word. A complete statement concerning the work of the Society in the home field would demand refer-

ence to the supply of mission Sabbath schools, to distribution in the United States army and navy, especially during the civil war; to the supply of seamen visiting our ports; of humane and criminal institutions; of the freedmen; and above all, of immigrants from many lands, upon whom the Scriptures are bestowed as soon as they set foot upon our shores.

CO-OPERATION WITH FOREIGN MISSIONARY SOCIETIES.

Turning to speak of the foreign work of the Society it must first be stated that its settled policy is to co-operate, as far as may be, with the Foreign Missionary Societies of the various Christian denominations. Before a Congress of Missions it may be well briefly to show how closely Missionary and Bible Societies are allied. The only publication of a Bible Society is the Bible, or portions of the Bible, and translations must be made into many languages. The scholarship of Harvard, or Yale, or Columbia, or any other University, is not equal to this service. It can be rendered only by the missionary who has labored among the people for whom the Bible is to be translated. In many cases he must construct a language. Listening with tireless patience to rude speech, he devises written characters, then produces a grammar, a dictionary, and at length a version of the Bible. By way of illustration let me refer to the translation of the Bible for the Gilbert Islanders, completed in April last, after thirty-four

years of labor, by the Rev. Hiram Bingham. This translation was made from the original tongues into a language which he had himself reduced to writing, and for which he had constructed a grammar and collected a vocabulary. I have been the more ready to name this instance, because it illustrates the vital relationship which exists between Missionary and Bible Societies. The Gilbert Islands are under the missionary oversight of Christians from the Sandwich Islands and Samoa, which only a few years ago were themselves in the depths of spiritual darkness. The story of the Sandwich Islands is too familiar to require repetition. Of Samoa, it may be simply stated that when John Williams first visited it in 1830, he found the people in the lowest state of degradation. They were without any knowledge of a written language, and the most debased and sanguinary rites characterized their system of paganism. Like the Sandwich Islands, Samoa received a written language and a translation of the Bible, and like them also, it is now sending Christian missionaries to other lands. Bible Societies, it is well known, are constantly making appropriations of funds to aid in defraying the expenses of translations made by missionaries.

The co-operation of Missionary and Bible Societies is also seen in the employment of mission presses for printing the Bible. Many editions of the Scriptures in Arabic and in Chinese, for instance, have been

printed for the American Bible Society upon the mission presses at Beirut, Shanghai, Foochow, and Peking.

Still further: The Scriptures, being translated and printed, must be distributed. The American Bible Society has a corps of more than three hundred col-porteurs in the foreign field, and these are members of the mission churches, nominated for this important service by those under whose ministry they have been converted.

The American Bible Society conducted its work in foreign lands, for many years, through the Missionary Societies, but its enlargement called, at length, for the appointment of agents of its own. In 1875 it had one agent on the eastern continent and one on the western. Now, so rapid has been the growth of its operations, there are six on each continent. The scope of my address forbids details. Omitting all reference to the interesting and fruitful fields of the Society in Europe, Asia, and Africa, it will not be regarded as inappropriate, before a Congress met under Columbian auspices, to turn for a moment to Latin America.

WORK OF THE AMERICAN BIBLE SOCIETY IN LATIN AMERICA.

As early as 1818 the Society printed the New Testament in Spanish, and finding all existing versions

unsatisfactory—that of Valera being many years older than the authorized English version—the Society, in order to meet the wants of sixty millions of Spanish-speaking people, has recently produced, at great expense, an entirely new version of the Bible from the original tongues. Tours of exploration have been made again and again by the Society's representatives, and its duly appointed agents are now to be found in the valley of the La Plata, in Brazil, Peru, Venezuela, Central America, Mexico, and Cuba. During the past ten years 540,000 volumes have been sent from the Bible House, in New York, to these fields.

Another characteristic of Bible Societies ought now to be named.

PIONEER SERVICE.

They are especially to be prized, because of their fitness for pioneer service. They bear the message of salvation to places beyond the reach, or at least the easy reach, of the living missionary. There are portions of the world where the representatives of the Missionary Society would not be received—might even be scornfully rejected—but where the voiceless ministry of a printed Gospel finds a welcome. In the very heart of China, of Japan, of Turkey, of Mexico, of Brazil, indeed, in every quarter of the globe, churches now flourish, as centers of light, which trace their origin to the silent but potent influence of single volumes,

or even single pages, of the oracles of God. This statement is abundantly sustained by the correspondence of missionaries. To name a single instance. The Rev. W. D. Powell, a missionary of the Baptist denomination in Mexico, writes to the Agent of the American Bible Society: "I appreciate most heartily the work done by your noble Society in this republic. It has been the foundation and bulwark of all other evangelical effort. I have often been where the people had never seen a missionary of any other denomination, but I have never been where the colporteur of the American Bible Society was unknown."

THE WORK OF BIBLE SOCIETIES WILL ALWAYS BE
NEEDED.

Once more: Bible Societies not only go before but they follow after. They are charged with a specific commission, which calls for the most earnest service when the efforts of Missionary Societies are no longer required. Missionaries bear the message of life to heathen lands. They construct, it may be, a written language, and enrich it by a translation of the Bible. The inspired book is widely circulated. Converts are multiplied, and in due time native Christians are fully able to conduct the enterprises of the church. The Missionary Society is then free to withdraw its representatives from a field where their very success renders them

no longer useful. The retirement of the missionary does not, however, diminish the demand for the Scriptures. On the contrary, the larger the number of persons, in any country, who believe that the promises and precepts of the Bible are inspired of God, the more imperative will be the call for the specific efforts of the Bible Society. Witness the immense circulation of the Scriptures in Great Britain and the United States.

CONCLUSION.

But I must hasten. In concluding, permit me to emphasize the fact that the founders of Bible Societies were men who had tested the Bible for themselves, and knew that it was what it claimed to be, a perfectly unique book, bearing a message of salvation to individual sinners. In this faith their successors have continued to labor until this day. The history of Bible distribution in all lands is replete with evidence that the word of God is still, as it ever has been, a word of saving power. Diaz, the apostle of Cuba, assures us that when, through various kindly ministries, he became the possessor of a Spanish Bible, the simple narrative of the young man who was born blind led him to the Saviour. The passage, "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life," has proved to

be a mighty spiritual force. The violence of a mob in a Brazilian town was recently quelled, we are told, under the influence of its strange power. To Neesima, of Japan, as he spelled out the meaning of the verse in a Chinese Testament for which he had exchanged his short sword, it opened a new and wonderful world of light. Bishop Corrie, of Madras, tells us of a Brahmin to whom the same words brought salvation, and another missionary in India, tells of their power over an ignorant woman of the lowest caste, so that we have the clearest proof of the adaptation of the Inspired Word to the wants of sinners with or without culture, with or without rank. The Bible is full of this power because it is full of Christ. Professor Monier Williams, of Oxford, in addressing a company of young men about to enter the foreign missionary service, states the matter in terse and forcible terms when he exalts the Bible because it affirms of the Founder of Christianity that, "*He, a sinless Man, was made sin*;" and that "*He, a dead and buried Man, was made life.*" So long as the Bible contains these truths, Bible Societies will continue to disseminate them among all the "tribes and peoples and tongues" of the wide world.
